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TERRESTRIAL COMETS.

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CONJECTURES

UPON THE

NATURE AND MOTION

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METEORS,

WHICH ARE ABOVE THE

ATMOSPHERE.

BY THOMAS CLAP, A. M. LATE PRESIDENT OF YALE-COLLEGE.

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T PON feveral observations made upon fundry Meteors, which have appeared in Europe and New-England, I have collected the following general phænomena:

I. THEY appear like round balls of fire, or globes of red hot iron, or white hot iron, ready to melt, as large as the fun or moon, in the meridian, commonly furrounded with a flame which appears like a tail, with streams and sparkles not so bright as the body. They frequently exceed the light of the moon, and in fome instances that of the fun, so as to make a shadow in the clearest funshine.

II. THESE Meteors have been feen passing through the air, at all points of the compass, over a space of ground above 100, and sometimes above 500 miles long, and above 100 miles wide, with an exceeding great velosity. I could never get obfervations accurate enough, to determine the velocity with any degree of exactness. Doctor Halley supposes it to be above 300 miles, and Doctor Pringle about 1000, in a minute. I rather suppose it does not exceed 500, for the reasons hereafter mentioned.

III. To each particular perfon observing, who stands in or near the line of their course, they seem to rise while they are coming towards him, and to fall when they are going from him, as the fun rises and sets, seemingly at a small distance. But by comparing the observations made by several perfons standing a little out of the line of their course, at the distance of 50, 100, or 500 miles from each other, it appears that at their first approach or appearance they are 50 or 100 miles distant from the earth; then they come within 20 or 30 miles of it; and asterwards are at the distance of 50 or 100 miles again; which different distances seem to arise principally from the curvature of the earth. Or if these several distances of any one Meteor have not been accurately determined on both sides of its nearest approach, yet it is evident, that some Meteors, during the time in which they have been observed, have been coming nearer to the earth, and others going farther from it.

IV. THESE

IV. THESE Meteors, in their transit, make a continual whizzing or humming moife; or, as some say, a noise like a great number of drums, or guns, or distant combling thunder; which is heard presently after they pass by. And about the time they come nearest the earth, or a little after, the body of the Meteor seems to burst like a bomb, with a great explosion of flames, streams, and sparkles; and presently after there is a very loud noise, sometimes like terrible thunder, so as to shake the ground and houses, like an earthquake, or like the report of a very large cannon near at hand; or, as some say, as loud as a thousand cannon fired together, at zo or 30 miles distance. And when it is cloudy, noises like distant cannon, or rumbling thunder, have been heard passing through the air, without any distinct light.

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V. ALTHOUGH these Meteors, by reason of their extreme velocity and great diftance, generally become invisible in about a minute after they pass by; and as they recede from any person, presently make but a small angle with the horizon, and seem to be suddenly intercepted by horizontal clouds, houses, &c. yet there is no sufficient evidence that any of these high Meteors, which have moved 100 miles or more, ever did really fall to the ground, or become wholly extinct; though after the emission of so much of their fire in the explosion, they are not so bright, and have no flame or tails.

VI. THESE Meteors generally appear as often or oftener than once in 20 or 30 years. Near ten of them have been feen in England within these 100 years; as related in the Phi of. Trans. Abr. vol. II. page 200; vol. IV. by Jones. part II. page 134–135, 136, 137, 156; vol. VIII. page 121, 123; with that in 1758, ingenioully treated upon by Doctor Pringle. Three or four fuch Meteors have been obferved in New England within these 50 years; but as they have been generally supposed to be of the fame nature with thunder, lightning, flooring flars, and fuch like lower Meteors, which feem to have no existence above two or three minutes, there have not been such critical observations made upon them as I could wish may be made hereafter. Yet these general phænomena, I take to be as certain as can ordinarily be collected from such fudden, transient, and unexpected observations, generally made by the lower fort of people: And have therefore been led to conjecture a new Theory of the nature and motion of these high Meteors.

Now to affign a natural caufe or reafon for any thing, is to refolve it into the general laws of nature, by which the wife Greator governs the world; and to fhew its connection with other things, according to those general laws by which we find theuniverse is governed, so far as we are acquainted with it. And the fewer laws we have recourse to, which will folve all the apparent phænomena, the greater is the probability that we have hit upon the true theory. And,

I. Is the apparent diameter of these fiery globes is equal to those of the sun or moon, in the meridian, and subtends an angle of above haif a degree, at the distance of 50 miles from the observer, then it is evident that their real diameter is half a mile at least.

II. IT seems evident that these globes are solid and firm, at least as to the external parts.

1. BECAUSE, they preferve their globular shape and motion throughout their whole course, and after the explosion. For if they confisted only of inflammable matter, matter, of the nature of pulvis fulminans, or a train of gun-powder, fired at one ed, (as fome of the lower Meteors fem to do) there would be no probability that they would invariably preferve their exact globular fhape; but would melt down, burn up, or difficate with such an intense heat, as mult cause or accompany such a vast explosion of flame and found.

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2. BECAUSE, they are ftrong and firm enough to with ftand the force of fo great a thock as is given at the explosion. The noise is generally represented as being equal to loud thunder, a large cannon near by, or a thousand cannon at the distance of 20 or 30 miles. And I suppose that a thousand cannon fired at the distance of 25 miles, give just as loud a report as one cannon at the distance of a quarter of a mile. The greatness of the explosion being in a sesquiplicate ratio of the distance heard *. And if the Meteor is about 30 miles high, where the atmosphere is 500 times more rare. than it is upon the earth, "in order to produce the fame found to our ears, it must be equal to 500,000 cannon fired upon the earth. And if this explosion is made by an elastick fluid, as violent as gun powder, then the matter of this globe must be as firong and firm as the iron of cannon; and the fides of the fame proportional thicknef, which is about go rods, in order to fland such a violent shock. If this explosion is caused by an elastick fluid, of the nature of electrical fire, as I shall afterwards shew, then the firmnels of the globe must be almost the same. For when a body is charged with it, at or near the inftant when it is discharged, the fire is retained in it with as great a force, as that with which it is discharged, or would finke against, another body. So that the force with which the fire goes out, by any elastick spring, or repulsive power, is impressed on the body it leaves. Or if it be drawn out by the attraction of some other body, the force of that attraction is taken off from the body it leaves, which will have the same effects upon it. And hence a large phial or jarr, when it is overcharged with electrical fire, will sometimes burst, like a bomb, and that although it was strong enough to withstand the weight or expansion of the air, which is 151b. on every superficial inche; and such a pressure upon a sphere half a. mile in diameter, will lie above 5,000,000lb

IF it should be objected, the clouds are not folid bodies; and yet they emit a violent explosion; to this I reply, that the explosion of thunder and lightning is but very small, in comparison with that of a Meteor; for, thunder is rarely heard to miles, whereas, a Meteor may be heard above 100; and the thunder must be within half a mile, to be heard as loud as a Meteor at the distance of 30. And upon computation of the different distances and rarity of the air, it will appear, that the explosion

• The undulations of found are prepagated from a fonorific body in concave shells, increasing very much like the blowing up of a biadder. The whole pressure of the air upon the infice of the shell, is equal at all magnitudes, taking the whole shell together; but less upon each particular part or spot, as it grows ligger. The magnitude of the sound is its proportion to the solid content of the spherical shell; and the auastility of it (at a y particular distance) is in proportion to the pressure upon any particular part, at that distance. Therefore, as the solid content of the sphere is to the superficies, or as the cube of any number

is to the square of the same number, so is the magnitude of a found to the distance heard. Or multiply the diftance by the square root of itself, and it gives the magnitude of the sound. 1000 Magnitude. 343 512 729 64 125 Cube. 27 216 100 Disance. 81 Square. I 01 49 30 9 7. 10 8 6 Root 1 2 4 . 5 3 Thus.

explosion of thunder is not a 10,000th part fo great as that of a superior Meteor; and yet a cloud, containing 5,000.000 tuns of water, when it discharges its electrical fire, recoils as much as a cannon, in proportion to its weight, and is so violently agitated, that the small bubbles are fuddenly dashed together into drops, which immediately fall down in rain. And if the explosion of a Meteor is so great, when the noise heard is only equal to the report of a single cannon near by; how great must it be in those instances, where it causes an earthquake 40 or 50 miles round? It feems impossible that there should be such a prodigious forcible explosion, without making an alteration in its perfect globular shape, unless it be very rigid and firm*.

3. THEIR folidity appears from their extreme velocity for many hundreds of miles: For, if a meer flame; fmoke, or powder, or any thing not ftrongly cemented together, was flot out of a cannon at the velocity of 500 miles a minute, it would immediately diffipate or diffolve: Or, if fo great a body flould continue together, it would neceffarily drive before it a large column of air, which, by the refiftance of the wis inertiæ, would be extremely condenfed, and the friction of it, by the fides of the Meteor, would prefently wear it away, unlefs it was very hard and firm. The round ball always runs away, and leaves the flame, tail and fparkles behind it; juft as a cannon ball leaves the fire and fmuke, or the nucleus of a comet runs before its tail. Upon these confiderations, it feems evident, that the globe of thefe Meteors is a firm, folid fubftance; at leaft, as to the external part. I would, then, obferve,

III. THERE is a continued whizzing, humming, or tumbling noife, like diffant drums, guns, or thunder, made by these Meteors, and heard presently after they pass by, about a quarter to loud as the explosion: I suppose this is caused by the friction of the Meteor upon the atmosphere ;-- for a cannon ball, of fix inches in diameter, passing through the air, with 1-25th part of the velocity of the Meteor, will make a humming noise, which is generally heard two miles. Now, if we multiply the fquare of the difference of the velocities, into the quare of the difference of the diameters, we shall find that the resistance of the air upon the Meteor is, to that upon a cannon ball, as 17,000,000,000 to 1.† And 6,700,000 being the fquare of that number of which 17,000,000,000 is the cube, will represent the proportion of the distance in which the humming of the Meteor will be heard farther than that of a cannon ball: And being diminished to a 500th part on account of the rarity of the atmosphere, the proportion will be as 13,400 to 1. And because the humming of the

Thus in the explosion of gui	n-powder: Supp	ofing 31 cubic	inches to a pou	nd.
Quantity. [Cubic inches, 1	310:1016	620 : 20 <i>lb</i> .	930 : 30lb	1240: 4016.
Distance. 1 Miles, - 1 1-	2 68	109	141	173
So the found of a bell accord	ling to its weigh	bt		1.00
Quantity. 102. 16	5 : 1 <i>lb</i> .	10016.	50016.	100016.

And for and the second for a mile the second

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Distance. 5 rods. 30 Mountains, contrary or confused winds, and such accidental causes, may sometimes interrupt the sound, so as not always to be heard exactly in this proportion.

* Since these balls of fire have been observed to accompany earthquakes, I would propose it, to be confidered, whether the explosion of Meteors may not oftentimes be the cause of carthquakes, as well as the eruption of subterraneous fires.

A See Newton's Princip. Math. Book II. Prop. 35. Cor. 5.

the cannon-ball is heard but a 50th part fo far as the report of a cannon, that number must be divided by 50, which will make the bumming-note of the Meteo: equal to the report of 268 cannon, a' the distance of 25 miles. And the explicition of the Meteor being represented to be equal to 100 cannon at that distance, the hummingnoife will be 1 4th part of it. And this humming note will be lefs, as the distance or altitude of the Meteor is greater.

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IV. THE great expletion and flame attending these Meteors, is caused by the discharge of electrical fire, collected by the friction of the atmosphere, and emitted about the time, or a little after, it approaches nearest to the earth, and becomes overcharged. I suppose electrical fire is not effentially different from common fire, and is a kind of universal element diffuted, in some degree, into almost all bodies in the universe, and, by friction, may be collected into a much greater quantity in fome particular bodies : And, when the whole fuddenly ruthes out in one place or ftream, it is there fo greatly collected or condensed, like the rays of the fun in a focus, that it becomes common fire, capable of inflaming any combustible matter; and, by the extreme celerity of its motion, to violently agitates the air, as that its elaflick fpring becomes sensible to the ear. Common experience teaches, that when a collection of visible fire is once begun, the friction of the air upon it, at the velocity of half a mile a minute (as in the blowing of a pair of bellows) will inflame and increase it to a very great degree : And, therefore, it is reasonable to suppose, that the friction of the air, at the velocity of 1000 half miles in a minute, (the force of which is 1,000,000 to 1) will collect fire where it was not begun before, or but in a low degree; as all bodies grow warm by friction : And, we find by experience, that fire is often collected by foft bodies, which do not make fo great a refistance as condenfed air, though moved with a velocity much lefs than that of a Meteor .--- Dr. Boerhave, on Chymistry, page 249, speaking of collecting fire by friction, says, " The " furfaces of two bodies being applied together, one may pass fo fwiftly by the other, " as that nothing but file, the friftest body in nature, can fucceed immediately into " the vacant places; and by that means it becomes collected, in the path of the " moving body, and so it has, as it were, a fiery atmosphere around it. And, " (page 231) that balls exploded in the night, out of great guns, grow hot in their " paffage through the air, so as sometimes to appear ignited." And if a cannonball will collect some visible degree of electrical fire, then the Meteor, which has above twenty five times the velocity, and contequently above fix hundred times the friction, may collect such a quantity of electrical fire, as may be fufficient to answer all the phænomena. For a fost piece of leather moving upon an electrical globe or tube, with the velocity of two and an half feet per fecond, or 150 feet, which is a thirty fifth part of a mile, in a minute, will collect a large quantity of electrical fire in a very fhort time. And I suppose 150 superficial inches of leather, patting over an electrical globe or tube, with the velocity of 150 feet a minute, and each inch prffed with a force equal to the weight of one pound, will be sufficient to raise a large spark or snap of electrical fire; especially after the globe is once sufficiently warmed. The motion of the leather being at the rate of a thirty-fifth part of a mile a minute, and that of the Meteor 500 miles, the proportion of their velocities is as 1 to 17,500; and the momentum or effect produced will be just the same, whether we take the number of pounds weight in the air (preffing upon the globe) at the velocity of the Meteur, or elfe 17,500 times fo many pounds at the velocity of the leather ..

A CLORE passing very swiftly through the air, dtives before it a column of air almost equal to itself. The elastick force of the air will not be sufficient to overcome C its vis inertiæ, fo as fuddenly to protrude the air much before it, or on either fide. By the motion of f and, we fee that the elaftick fpring of the air will not move it more than 12 miles in a minute, which being not a fortieth part of the velocity of a Meteor, is very inconfiderable in this cafe. And as action and reaction are always equal, the vis increase of the air, and the velocity communicated to it, by its refiftance against the Meteor, makes the fame action upon the Meteor as it would do if the air was non elaftick. The Meteor in two minutes moves through a cylinder of air iooo miles long and half a mile in diameter; which being taken one place with another, 500 times rater than common air, is equal in weight to two miles of common air or 12 feet of water; which, upon computation of 76th. for every cubic foot, is 5,000,000 coolb. As the Meteor moves 17,500 times fafter than the leather on the tube, multiply the number of pounds by that ium, at d the product will be 87,500, 000,000 cool, equal to the number of pounds, moving with the velocity of the teather, which being divided by 150th. (which make one electrical fnap) the quotient will be 583,000,000,000, the number of electrical fnaps collected.

AND that the Meteor will contain such a quantity, is evident, because a phiaf holding a pint charged with electrical fire, will give a fnap which can be heard 50 feet, or 100th part of a mile. A cannon is heard 100 miles, which is 10,000 times to far as the phial; which being multiplied by the square root of itself, gives the quantity of the explosive force, or found, which is heard f far. Then 10,000×100 = 1 000,000, the number of electrical snaps which are equal to the report of a cannon, and confequently 500,000,000 000 fnaps are equal to 500,000 cannon. N w the Meteor being a sphere half a mile in diameter, contains 574,000,000 000 pints, which will give the number of shaps before-mentioned equal to 500,000 cannon; besides a feventh part overplus which may remain in the Meteor.

AND to fhew that 1,000,000 electrical fnaps are equal to the report of a cannon: I suppose that a quantity of powder equal to a cube of near 1 10th part of an inch, on each fide, being fired out of a proper instrument, will make a report which may be heard 50 feet, like an electrical fnap; and 1,000,000 such quantities, which is about 201b. being fired out of a cannon, will be heard 100 miles.

As all these proportions agree among themselves, it is probable they may be near the truth; but if they are not, they will equally serve to 'ead the mind into a conception, how it is possible that such a vast solid body may be so charged with electrical fire, as to give an explosion equal to the report of a cannon near by, or to 1000 cannon at the distance of 30 miles.

V. THIS mighty body, which if it be near as folid as iron, must weigh about 2 000,000,000 tons, cannot be railed up, near 100 miles from the earth, by any laws of nature that we are acquainted with. Water, when rarified into the finest mists or bubbles, cannot be carried up above 3 or 4 miles by the weight of the atmosphere; and when it is condensed to about an 800th part of the weight in its natural flate, it immediately falls down again. Much less can it be carried up 40 miles where the air is near 3000 times as light. And it feems abfolutely impossible, that it should be carried up 100 miles, which is double the utmoss extent of the atmosphere. Or if we could suppose it possible, that any kind of matter could be rarified for as to be carried up fo high, yet when it comes to be confolidated, a thousandth part fo much as these Meteors, it must fall directly down. VI. IT

* Newt. Prin. B. 11. Prop. 33. Cor. 3.

VI. It is beyond the power of any laws of nature, already known, to give fuch a heavy body fuch a prodigious projectile velocity, above 20 times fo great as that of a cannon ball; and by multiplying the difference of their weights into the difference of their velocities, it appears that the momentum or force imprefied mult be above 3,000,000,000 fo great. All other bodies moving in the univerfe, that we know of, were at first let in motion by the immediale hand of the omnipotent Creator; and are fince continued in motion according to the fimple laws of projectile and difference. And as our furest reasoning in these things is by way of analogy, according to the known laws of nature, we mult conclude that these Meteors are governed by the fame general laws; and as all the cœ effial bodies, are fo remote that they can have no fensible influence upon them, when they are within 100 miles of the earth, it is evident that the earth mult be the attractive central body, round which they revolve; as the fecondary planets revolve round the primary; or rather as comets revolve round the fun in long elipfes, near to a parabola.

VII. I SHALL therefore calculate the motion of these Terrestrial Comets round the earth, on the same principles as Doctor Halley calculates the motion of comets round the sun.

1. A BODY revolving in a circle, at the diffance of 4000 miles from the centre, which is about 25 from the furface, will perform its revolution in 84 minutes. For as the cube of the moon's diffance is to the fquare of its periodical revolution in minutes, fo is the cube of 4000 to the fquare of 84'; which is 300 miles in a minute: But if it revolves in an elipfes, near to a parabola, its velocity is augmented as 7 to 10, nearly, and will be 428 miles in a minute: The annual and diurnal motion of the earth may make a fmall difference.

2. As the area of a circle 0,785 is to 84 minutes, fo is 1-3d to 35°, the time in which it will defcribe a quadrant of a parabola, with the velocity of a circle.

3. As the fquare root of 2 is to 1, fo is 35 minutes, the time as in a circle, to 25', the time as in a parabola. Therefore, the Meteor defcribes a quadrant, or 100° of mean motion, in 25', which is 4 degrees of mean motion, and 6° 6' angular motion from the perihelion, in one minute. Upon these data I have calculated the following table of the motions of this Terrestrial Comet. The first column contains the minutes of time before and after the perihelion or perigee: The second, the degrees of mean motion : The third, the degrees of angular motion : The fourth, its diffance from the centre of the earth : And the fifth, its diffance from the furface of the earth, supposing its least diffance, at the perigee, is 25 miles : The fixth, its motion from the perigee, in its orbits, in miles.

Time.	Mean.motion.	Ang. motion	Diff. from cent	Dift. fr. Jurf.	Dift. in orbit.
O i11.	00	0° 0'	4,000	25	0
1	4	6 6.	4,011	36	428
2	- 18 4	12 85.	4,045	70	854
3	12	19- 2	4,101	126	1,280
- 4	10	23 45	4.177	202	1,700
25. 1.h. 07.67	100	90 0	8,000	4,025	a state and the set
- b	240	118	15.076		-
·4	5700	100 58	140,200		

To a perfon who stands at the perigee, at the distance of 428 miles, it will appear almost in the horizons

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THIS calculation feems to answer exactly to all the apparent motions of these Terrestrial Comets, and particularly that they appear fish to be 50 or 100 miles distant from the earth, then, in their course, to come within 20 or 30 miles of it, and afterwards are at a greater distance again; as may be clearly seen in the delineation annexed : It also seems to determine its real velocity with a greater precision than the most critical observations hitherto made : For, if it moves less than 300 miles in a minute, it must, in a little time, fall to the earth; and if it moves more than 428, it must go off in an hyperbola.

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THE preceding calculation is founded upon the known laws of motion, in which we cannot be miltaken; but we have room for different conjectures about the number and periodical revolutions of these Terrestrial Comets; yet we are circumscribed. within certain limits. On the one hand we must not suppose that their number is for great, or that their periodical revolutions are so frequent, as to exceed observation : On the other hand we must not suppose that their periodical revolutions, and trantverse diameters, are so great, as that, in their apogee, they would be in danger of being carried away, or greatly disturbed in their motion, by the attraction of Venus, or any other coelectial body. It feems most natural to suppose, that there are more than one, and that their orbits are very differently fituated, like those of the solar Lomety, in order to account for their different motions to all parts of the Heavens : Though, if we should suppose that there is but one only, it feems possible that all these various motions might be accounted for, by the diurnal and annual motion of the earth, and the conftant attraction of the moon, in its various longitudes and latitudes, up n the Meteor, in the feveral parts of its orbit; which must constantly change the lituation of it, and may poffibly, in length of time, carry its inclination, apogee and nodes, to eve y part of the Heavens. By the observations which have been made, it seems evident, that one has been seen in each country, oftener than once in 30 years. Upon the surface of the terrestrial globe, energiare 1000 countries, each abou 500 miles quare; so that 30 of them may appear somewhere in the world within the compais of a year, and yet not be f en in each particular country fo often as once in 30 years. Let us, then, conjecture for the prefent, until we have farther light by more accurate oble various; that there are 3 fuch Comets revolving round the earth, whose mean distances are about as great as the moon's, and, therefore, performing about 36 revolutions in a year; then one of them will appear in each country of 500 miles iquare, once in 27 years : And so often, at leaft, they have been in fact seen in Old England and New. This conjecture, I think, will fully folve all the various phæ somena of these Meteors which have huber to been observed. And if their periodical revolutions are once in a month, they will loss but little of their heat in their apogee, and so will be prepared to receive and emit a large quantity of fire when they come near the earth : Indeed, by their friction upon the atmosphere, they will lose near an hund edth part of their velocity, and so, in length of time, will be in danger of falling to the earth, sooner than the planets are of falling to the fun. But this may, in some measure, be prevented, by the greater density and pressure on the lower side- the explosion towards the earth may cause it a little to recoil from it ;--- and a wife Providence may fo order the fituation of their orbits, as that once and a while the attraction of the moon, or some other heavenly body, may accelerate their motion and enlarge their orbits. As Mr. Whiston supposes, the Comet, at the flood, accelerated the motion of the earth, and made its aqual revolution 5 days and a quarter longer than it was before.

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Our observations have heretofore been so impersect, as that we cannot easily determine minute circumstances; but the general theory seems highly probable, is not certain, that these superior Meteors are solid bodies, half a mile in diameter; revolving round the earth in long elipses, their least distance being about 20 or 30 miles; that, by their friction upon the atmosphere, they make a constant rumbling noise, and collect electrial fire; and, when they come nearess to the earth, or a little after, being then overcharged, they make an explosion as loud as a large cannon:

I SHALL add one conjecture respecting the use and benefit of these Meteors.---It is possible that, by their violent explosion and agitation, they may cleanse and purify the air, and render it more falubrious to mankind; much more than thunder and lightning. There is an observation in the Phil. Trans. Abr. Vol. VIII, page 519, which seems much to favour this conjecture; it is in these words: "A Meteor was see feen over England and Ireland, and at Venice, at the same time: It appeared like a great ball of fire, which burst with an explosion which shook great part of the Island, and seemed to set the whole atmosphere on fire. This Meteor put an end to the Catarrh and Diarrhea, and restored a general health,"

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